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The World

Sticking Up for The Bulgarians

True or not, Italian police reports of a "Bulgarian connection" to the assassin who shot Pope John Paul II hit a nerve in Moscow last week. In the latest official reaction, Leonid M. Zamyatin, the Kremlin's top information specialist on international affairs, denounced speculation about a trail leading from the attack in St. Peter's Square last year to Sofia's secret police and thence to the K.G.B., the Russian security agency whose leader at the time happened to be Yuri V. Andropov.

"An evil-minded campaign that has not a grain nor an iota of truth," said Mr. Zamyatin, who presumably speaks from experience.

The "connection" is taken seriously by much of the Italian press, which recalled the Pope's powerful role in supporting the Solidarity union in his homeland. Last week in Rome, Defense Minister Lelio Lagorio seemed to agree, telling Parliament, "The attempt on the Pope's life by Ali Agca (the Turkish assassin) is to be considered a true act of war in time of peace, a precautionary and alternative solution to an invasion of Poland."

But Foreign Minister Emilio Colombo and intelligence sources in Washington, Israel and West Germany were not convinced. In a clear reference to Mr. Lagorio, the newspaper of Mr. Colombo's Christian Democratic Party accused the party's Socialist coalition partners of "manipulating" the issue for internal political advantage. Mr. Colombo added no specifics, merely affirming Italy's determination to use all means to combat foreign subversion. Rome, he said, would tighten visa controls on Bulgarians and may order their embassy to cut its staff.

Sofia, denying all, recalled its ambassador after Italy arrested a Bulgarian airline employee in Rome in connection with the shooting and the announcement that two other Bulgarians were wanted for questioning. Bulgaria put two Italians accused of photographing military sites on trial for espionage last week, but claimed their nationality was purely coincidental.

Western intelligence sources suggested that enemies of Mr. Andropov may have spread "disinformation" about the case. They doubted that the Bulgarians, under K.G.B. tutelage, would have considered the problematical political gains from such a plot worth the high risk of exposure.

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